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ABSTRACT

This description of a process used in a social studies methods course presents an experiential approach to helping students learn power sharing and decision-making skills. By leaving students alone with instructions to decide cooperatively on desired class changes, type of evaluation, and leadership, students gain experience in negotiation and decision making. The paper lists questions teachers might consider before beginning such an exercise, as well as questions for debriefing the experience. Questions are designed to stimulate inquiry and critical thinking concerning the nature of power itself, reactions to the exercise, useful conflict resolution techniques, and methods of consensus seeking. Questions are also provided to clarify confusion concerning the fluidity of power shifting in a freely functioning group. The paper concludes with a discussion of student reactions to the experience. (LH)

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POWER SHARING AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES

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POWER SHARING AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS

To teach students to negotiate the system is to help them believe in it. Exercises in using the voting machine are vain if students never learn voting is part of a process that belongs to them, that they operate it to achieve their objectives and make their lives worthwhile. If all they know about the system is that it produces rules made by others, that it often manipulates them without their having any say in determining what happens to them, they are likely to become convinced that they can do little to affect the events in their own lives.

Moved by such a conviction, young and old retreat into privatism, to small arena of activity where their intentions and choices do have visible results. These are the non-voters, whose chant is, "It doesn't make any difference whether I vote or not. It doesn't matter which candidate is elected. They never do what I want anyway." Students who pass all the tests with good scores, yet have this attitude present a clear and present danger to a free society because they simply do not believe it works.

For some years, I used simulations to obejectify lessons in decision-making. While these are useful, I finally decided that real life was better, so last year I started giving a shared power experience to my methods classes in social studies. Around mid-semester, after the class had become acquainted with me and with

their fellow students, I left students alone, with instructions to decide how they would like to change the class, what they would like to add, what they wanted to increase and what they would like to diminish. They were also to decide what items they wanted as the basis of their evaluation. They were to decide whether to choose a leader, how to reach consensus, and how their report would be presented to me. When their decisions were made, they were to come and tell me it was time to return to class. Ensuing discussions took an hour or more. They seemed to be considered with great seriousness.

Student suggestions were carried out whenever it was possible to do so without disobeying university rules. A suggestion to schedule the rest of the classes in a nearby beer and pizza parlor was cancelled when it was discovered that a maze of bureaucratic detail was necessary for permanent off-campus scheduling of classes.

Although the real meaning of the experience emerged from debriefing the experience with cogent questions for students, the first questions were ones I asked myself before I started the experiment ---

> Is the school itself a kind of power pattern I teach by implication? In what ways is it or is it not the kind of pattern students need to learn? Where is the most effective setting for students to study political models? What responsibility do I as a social studies teacher have for teaching students how to share power and negotiate the system? Does my social studies class present a political model?

What kind? What kind of government does it most resemble? Does it prepare the student to live in a shared power society? How does my classroom model affect how my students learn to see the political world? What is the student most likely to understand as a motive for imitation---a model which is described or one which is experienced? Do I help students experience the political world---full both of frustrations and of opportunities to be creative and to choose?

I had a few more questions for myself.

Does the university system share power with me? How do I feel when it does not? How does its failure to do so affect my performance?

Questions for debriefing the experience started with inquiries about the nature of power itself---

Is power bad? Will it exist regardless of what we do? What happens when no power is exercised? Is power a natural aspect of the relationships of human beings? Will it always emerge when there is more than one person present?

The next issue was the effect of the experience on those who went through it---

What effect does it have on your participation in an activity to know that your participation will affect its outcome? Why does sharing power generate interest? Does everyone love power? Is this natural? Why? How does it add meaning to life? Why do we feel good when we feel we have power over our lives? What effect does it have when we feel we have none?

The participants wanted to talk about the activities they and their classmates experienced.

Do some students test the parameters of the experience right away? Do some have a good sense of how the experience should work from the start? Is this a function of having or not having experience with the exercise of power? Is there a way to create power-sharing structures where we learn to take sensitive care of the dignity and concerns of others? How can courtesy be used to dignify others?

Students discovered negative reactions in others.

> Are some bored, erratic, stimulated, serious, playful, responsible, or all of these? Is this mixed and confused response an evidence of inexperience in the exercise of power? Can a consistent experience in sharing power create a more controlled response to its stimulus? Are there some whose instincts are to bully, challenge, or even hurt? Do they use the experience as a cathartic for their generalized hostilities? Do these behaviors come from having or not having power? Can the group develop control structures that keep hostile behavior from damaging the group? Must there be some restraints from outside?

One problem that emerged was deciding on a leader. Here are useful questions about this issue.

> What leadership emerged in your group? How did you choose it? Was your leader always the same person?

A student pointed out that some people know more and can do more than others. This stimulated other questions.

> Should decisions be made by the most able or the best informed? Do they always know best? How do we decide who is best able to make decisions? How do we take advantage of the wisdom of the wise without giving them more power than we should? What importance do you suppose the answer to this question has in the invention or representative democracy?

The comment was made that the meetings took a long time and not much got done.

> Is the operation of a free society always the most time-saving way to get things done? Is the process as important as the product? Why?

Students were asked to discuss these questions about how they felt toward each other.

> During your work together did you feel closer to each other and more interested in each other than you usually feel? Did you ever feel protective of each other when we all talked together? Why?

"What do we do when we just can't agree? I guess we just vote and the majority rules." Students were woefully ignorant of conflict resolution techniques and methods of consensus-seeking. And they were confused by the fluidity of power shifting in a freely functioning group. Here are some questions that led to clarification.

> How can we learn to be in the majority? Is that always easy? Will the majority decision be safe if it can be sabotaged by a dissident minority? How can a majority decision be implemented without driving the minority into apathy, subversion, or terrorism? Does the survival of the majority view sometimes depend on providing the minority with a place to continue to be productive as well as comfortable? Can one be a useful and creative representative of a minority viewpoint? How can the power of a minority view by maintained? How can creative alliances be forged to unite several minorities into a majority? If a minority viewpoint is later vindicated when a majority decision fails to produce acceptance, predicted, or desired results, how can new decisions be negotiated? What is the place of mid-course corrections, re-evaluation of goals when actions lead to a Pyrrhic victory, where the battle is won, but all the troops are dead? Can a seemingly powerless person wield influence? What part is played by working for change in socially acceptable ways, by being known for integrity, creativity, and fairness?

And while I was asking students questions about their experience, I was asking myself more questions too.

> What do I discover about myself when I share power? What effect does it have on my leadership? Do I gain or lose respect? Do students like me more or like me less? Is there more participation and a greater variety of responses in class after the experience? Do more people respond? Are there fewer apathetic students? Is it easier or

more difficult to teach and/or to get students to learn? If I do this exercise in one class and not in another, is there any difference in the way I feel about the two classes?

My biggest challenge occured a few classes later when it seemed necessary for me to assume the old mantle of authority on an issue. Should I share power on this important matter or was this one beyond my ability to trust and risk and beyond students' ability to be trusted? What if what I knew ought to be done did not prevail? On the other hand, what would happen to students if I failed to share power with them on this issue? Would they feel betrayed by my inconsistency and sudden resumption of authority? If I did intervene, would their practice in decision-making be so truncated that the more cynicism rather than more learning would result?

The story has a bittersweet ending. I went into class full of plans for structuring what was certain to be a confrontation without intimidating students or demanding submission and with determination to safeguard my dignity and theirs. I do not know yet whether to be pleased or disappointed at the outcome. The students had simply decided that they wanted me to take over and make the decision. I will never know whether they were motivated by defensiveness, boredom, fear, guilt, indifference, trust, or all of these.

I suddenly had a new problem---how to teach them about the dangers of trusting in a father-figure, a

den-mother, or a "man on a white horse," who would rescue them from the need to make up their own minds!